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Kenyan Basketry (Ciondo) by Women from Central and Eastern Kenya

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Introduction

Basketry is one of the oldest crafts in the world. In general basketry has been known to mirror traditions and knowledge acquired and developed within specific communities of practice¹ Kenyan basketry varies with the regions of the country from which they are produced and by the materials used. Most Kenyan basketry products are utilitarian and only a few are ornamental. Just like in other parts of the world, basket weavers utilize materials readily available to them.² Materials used by the Kenyan women basket weavers are usually locally sourced within the communities where they live, hence the baskets are associated with the regions where they are produced. These materials are such as grass, sisal, banana leaves and stems of certain plants depending on the locality. Kenya may be zoned into five regions where basketry is done, namely, Western and Nyanza region, coastal region, central Kenya, eastern Kenya, and north eastern region. This study investigates basketry making from the central and eastern Kenyan regions.

The basket weavers in these regions use similar techniques (mainly plain or twill) of weaving using locally sourced natural plant fibres and dyes. However, they have recently introduced synthetic materials and acrylic yarns. Basketry products in these regions are significant to the people because they have been used through generations as utilitarian products for use at home for carrying various types of products. The sizes range from small baskets used as handbags to large ones used for carrying heavy goods such as foodstuff and storage. More recently the basket products are significant wedding gifts from the bride's families. They are also largely used during dowry negotiation meetings before the wedding.

It is observed that basket weaving is female dominated skill in many parts of the world³ and the Kenyan situation is no different. Additionally, it has been noted that "each woven basket and bag, looped net and intricate adornment or string work resonates with a strong sense of place and shared stories of people and country."⁴ This can be seen in the images of baskets from different parts of Kenya presented in this case study. In this case study, therefore, I illuminate an interesting narrative of Kenyan women basket weavers.

¹ Chumash Basket, "'A Song of Resilience': Exploring Communities of Practice in Chumash Basket Weaving in Southern California," *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* Vol. 38, no. 2 (2018), 143-162.

² Andy Nestor Ryan Pazon, and Joana Marie P. Del Rio, "Materials, Functions and Weaving Patterns of Philippine Indigenous Baskets," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* Vol. 1, no. 2 (2018), 107-118.

³ Ugochukwu Chinonso Okolie, Christian Ehiobuche, Paul Agu Igwe, Michael Austin Agha-Okoro, and Chukwuemeka Christian Onwe, "Women Entrepreneurship and Poverty Alleviation: Understanding the Economic and Socio-cultural Context of the Igbo Women's Basket Weaving Enterprise in Nigeria," *Journal of African Business* (2021), 1-20.

⁴ Freja Carmichael, "Weaving memory, living embodiment," *Artlink* Vol. 40, no. 2 (2020), 44.

The Journey

In 2017, the Kenyan Government banned the use of plastics within the country due to environmental degradation. This necessitated the use of carrier bags, hence provoking this study. Before the ban it was easy to walk into any shopping mall, supermarket, or any retail shop without a bag, shop freely because your shopping would be packaged in plastic bags that were free and readily available. With the ban, it implied that shoppers and manufacturers would have to provide and use biodegradable bags. As industries tried to quickly adapt and seek alternative packaging, the populace were getting frustrated. Subsequently individual entrepreneurs quickly sought ways of coping with this change and among them basket weavers were not left out in seizing opportunities to not only earn a living⁵ with their skill but also cope with the social change in the country.

Methodology

This is a case study that was exploratory in nature and required seeking and talking to participants about their weaving experiences and the stories about the baskets they made. My first stop through this study was Kariokor market which is very close to Nairobi city centre (Kenya's capital city). It is a central source for various handcrafted merchandise from other parts of the country. The market is well-recognized for various types of craft products for utilitarian and ornamental uses. It stocks crafts for the tourist markets within Nairobi and its outskirts and acts as collection points of baskets from the rural areas. The baskets are conspicuously placed to attract customers. My aim was to find and talk to weavers in this market about their weaving skills and stories during the weaving process. I was keen to speak to the sellers, but unfortunately not many of the dealers (mainly women) were willing to speak to me.

My feeling was that they may have seen me as a potential competitor seeking to "steal" their business idea or they were just "brokers" and not willing to divulge information on their trade. I talked to one weaver and an assistant who told me their work was to sell and act as agents to collect merchandise from other weavers from the countryside. They mainly collected the baskets from eastern Kenya (Kitui) but also made their own baskets. This weaver too was not willing to give me any information on how she collected the baskets or how I would access other weavers. She nonetheless did tell me that there were groups of weavers, some of whom were sponsored by some NGOs to weave products for the tourist market and for export. However, she only had scanty information about these groups which would have formed my target group. At this point, I almost gave up on my journey of getting the information about the weavers.

⁵ Yve Chavez, "Basket Weaving in Coastal Southern California: A Social History of Survivance," *In Arts*, Vol. 8, no. 3, (2019), 94.



Baskets displayed in Kariokor market Nairobi (photo by author)

Since there are open markets in practically all towns in Kenya, I purposed to visit a few more markets to try my luck on specific days of the week. My next stop was central Kenya where I went to one of the main markets (Ruiru). Here, baskets and other merchandise such as food stuff and clothes are sold on Wednesdays and Saturdays that are designated as market days. Here I was completely unable to get any weaver. Most of the sellers were just retailers who said they acquired the baskets from middlemen who in turn sourced the baskets from the weavers. Nearly all of the baskets in this market were woven from sisal (for the warps) and plastic paper (for the wefts). My main interest was on the groups of weavers.



Baskets displayed in Ruiru market central kenya (photo by author)

I subsequently went to eastern Kenya (Embu, County), specifically Siakago market that operates on Tuesdays and Fridays. Here, I observed several weavers alongside their merchandise which were not necessarily baskets. They sold other stuff such dry cereals and made their baskets as they waited for customers. In this market, there were several women actively involved in weaving albeit individually. I approached one of the weavers, Nancy (not her real name) who gladly agreed to talk to me and hence became the link person to other weavers. I introduced myself and explained to her who I was and what I was interested in; learning about the basket weavers for academic purpose- to document their stories and use the information for academic purpose. Nancy appeared very thrilled that somebody would be interested in such a noble skill that was so naturally performed for leisure. After a brief chat we organized to meet at her home where she offered to bring together three other women weavers for a meeting. Nancy informed me that the women weavers she was inviting were part of a loosely organized group that met occasionally to discuss their personal and family affairs as they wove. Therefore this was going to be a formal meeting. She was going to choose three of the most reliable group members.



Women weavers and their merchandise (photo by author)

The meeting was organized at Nancy's house on a Saturday afternoon. The main research questions were;

1. *How was the group formed?*
2. *What were the objectives of the group?*
3. *How many members are in the group?*
4. *What activities do they engage in?*

The women scheduled me for 12 noon. This was because at that particular time the women have completed their daily home chores and are free to chat. Saturday was ideal because it was not a market day. Since there was no pin address for Nancy's house, I had to get directions from passers-by and through mobile phone conversations with Nancy. Being a very hot day, so we agreed to sit outside her house under a shady tree. I was the first guest to arrive and therefore was ushered into the house. The part of the country where the interview took place is remote and does not have proper infrastructure –roads, electricity and running water. I consequently realised that I was purposefully ushered into the house to observe some of the developments achieved by the group. There was a television set fully fitted by a satellite dish and a complete solar system. Nancy informed me that her mobile phone, solar system and television set was obtained from a scheme organized by a private telecommunication company that allows clients to pay through a hire purchase system of payment.

How the group was formed

The group was formed due to interest in basket weaving, a hobby, a past time and it is “all about weaving”. The group is composed of about 15 members even though not all are actively involved in the activities of the group. It is involuntary and any interested member within the vicinity is free to join if they abide by the rules of the group, such as courtesy, willingness to help in the general welfare of the group and marketing. There is no monetary contribution in the group such as “merry go round”, and all one is required to bring is the weaving yarn. The age group of the active members is 60-70 years, most of who are retired from government service (if they had

been employed). They are mostly widows with grown children who are out of the home compound. They all have grand children who are also not within their homes hence they are somewhat lonely.

The objective of the group

The women indicated that the objective of the group was ‘‘just weaving’’, and anybody passionate about basket weaving and ready to abide the rules of the group was invited to join. The members’ homesteads are all located near each other. All members are ‘‘friends’’ who are willing to help each other in all aspects of life.

How many members are in the group?

There are a total of about 15 members but not all are actively involved in the group’s affairs. The group is somewhat informal and is not a registered entity by the government. The members would like to formalize the group and be registered. This would help them benefit from any source of help from the government or NGOs but they said that they did not know how to go about the registration process.

What activities do they engage in?

General welfare of members

Apart from weaving, the group is involved in the general welfare of its members. For example, all the members have joined the scheme that has installed solar power and gadgets such as television set, satellite dish, lighting bulbs and mobile phone in their house. They are also involved in installation of rainwater harvesting and buying of plastic water tanks for water storage. They too are pulling resources together to have the sub-county government install piped water for their homesteads. Marketing of their products-the baskets are sold to family and friends through word of mouth and informal networks amongst the weavers.

Education and weaving skills refreshing

The women weavers informed me that apart from ‘‘just weaving’’ there is a lot that goes on amongst themselves and their families. Since each of them has a mobile phone purchased through the solar/TV purchase scheme, it is easy to contact each other at very short notice through a phone. None of the women is in active formal employment hence they are around the home most of the time. When they do meet up, there is always something to share such as, a new weaving skill, new/alternative sources of the weaving materials, and new market openings/orders for the baskets or a home making skills.



Women weavers in action during the case study (photo by author)

In case one person acquires an order for many baskets, they are always ready to share the order to hasten the process and earn money. There appears to exist positive competition amongst the weavers because they are always ready to share their market. This is understandable given that basket weaving is a manual skill taking time to weave a single basket. The women indicated that it takes up to two weeks to weave a single basket because the weaving is done part-time, mainly in the evenings or daytime after other home chores.

The weavers also indicated that there is always something new to learn from each other, such as placing of the warp weaving yarns to create the required size of the basket or the right tension of the baskets. Juliet (not her real name) indicated that she always gets the size wrong and Harriet (not her real name) was quick to guide/instruct on how to get it right. After laying the warps at the first instance, they should be gradually increased at the base to provide a large base/bottom, if a large basket is required. To weave a smaller basket, the bottom should be set according to the basket circumference and then woven this way till the end. All the weavers appeared to know how to curve the bottom to create the basket. The size (thickness) of the warp also determines the size of the baskets.

Even though this case study was not about interrogating the weaving skill but learning about the hidden stories behind the basket weavers, there was a lot for me to learn about the weaving technique itself. Every single yarn in a basket, either warp or weft tells a story. The warps tell more stories because they are naturally sourced and are processed from “scratch” from various plants around their environment. Most indigenous fibre producing plants are quickly diminishing due to overuse of land for agricultural purposes. Sisal is the type that is readily available and commonly used. Each of the weavers indicated that they either sourced the fibre from the bushes from which it is processed into the yarn or they had a specific person (not amongst the weavers) who sourced the fibres for them.

Processing the yarn from fibres involves getting the fibres from plants and spinning by hand. The source of yarn is important to the weaver as it ensures that they get the correct gauge/size of the yarn. It takes time, skill, and precision to spin a single yarn and there is a lot that goes on during the process. Juliet and Nancy talked of how often they are up at dawn or earlier when

unable to sleep and with the solar lighting they are able to weave till day light when they begin their usual daily chores. This narrative may elicit some health concerns such as the cited sleeplessness/insomnia, however it does not override the hidden stories of the basket weavers.

Results

Observations made from this case study show that basket weaving in eastern and central Kenya is a female dominated skill by the older generation and there are very few active basket weavers in general. Even though there might be several organized basket weaving groups in eastern Kenya, this case study was unable to establish these organized and registered groups of basket weavers in eastern and central Kenya. Furthermore, baskets woven in the various regions of Kenya are all different and unique due to the materials used and the specific skills used.

There is likely exploitation of basket weavers by brokers who buy baskets from the weavers and re-sell to the retailers of tourist markets. This is because these brokers are only interested in making as much profit as possible with little regard to the weaver. They normally purchase the baskets from the poor weavers at the lowest possible price and then re-sell at higher margins to other retailers or the NGOs agents.

Basket weaving is a process that carries with it ideas, the mind and skill of the weaver and whose skills are not transferable. The study has observed that most of the weavers are elderly and there are hardly any young basket weavers. The weavers of the baskets have first-hand experience of production techniques⁶ and hence they are able to engage in serious and continuous discourse through making, and consequently develop their own skill set in this craft. They double up as architects, designers, and manufacturers of specific baskets. The most unique and interesting outcome is that baskets made by the weavers in this case study are for utilitarian purposes regardless of the size.

For Nancy's group of friends and the Embu community in eastern Kenya, baskets (ciondo) are somewhat an integral part of their culture and identity⁷. Often baskets are made to order for specific functions such as weddings gifts or dowry negotiation tokens. There is need to document the processes of the weavers of which this study attempts to accomplish.

Conclusions

Even though basket weaving is an old and very useful craft skill, there is still little documented information about the basket weavers of central and eastern Kenya who are mainly women. The main materials used by basket weavers are natural and locally sourced and hence biodegradable. Marketing and income generation of the baskets is still at the subsistence levels because the weavers weave for leisure and individual satisfaction. The skill may be useful for income-generation if weavers are well organized and supported in the weaving through provision of raw materials and assisted in marketing their products. This study concurs with Hazelgrove Planel

⁶ Can Altay, and Gizem Öz, "Dialogic weaving: a favorable tension between design and craft," *Digital Creativity* Vol. 30, no. 1 (2019), 39-55.

⁷ Gabriel Frey, Marla R. Emery, and Suzanne Greenlaw, "Weaving together livelihood and culture in Maine, USA," *Poverty Reduction Through Non-Timber Forest Products*, (2019), 147-150.

that basketry weaving is “a process of production where not only products, but knowledge, subjects and relationships are created, nurtured and developed”⁸. Basket (ciondo) weaving of eastern Kenya is a unique craft in its own right whose skills need to be passed on through generations in order to maintain it. However, this craft might be lost and hence the need for documentation.

⁸ Lucie Hazelgrove Planel, "Weaving through life: an ethnographic study of the significance of pandanus work to the people of Futuna Island, Vanuatu," PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2019.

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